

Bluth deals in a currency money can't buy

By George Ferguson
Associate business editor

Alan Bluth's business is keeping others in business. But it involves health, not money.

"An acquaintance of mine — the key man to a successful business — died prematurely at age 50 when I think he could have lived much longer. After a 2½-year search, he was never adequately replaced. The business was on the ropes when it was sold. Since then, I've asked myself, 'How do you measure the value of that man?'"

How often does this happen? How often do key employees — including middle management, top executives and business owners — enter their 50s so out of shape they are prime candidates for a degenerative disease or a heart attack?

"Well, about 1 million Americans die every year from heart attacks, and you can bet a big share of those are business executives trying to combat stress and health problems with an unconditioned body," says Bluth.

Bluth, a physical therapist, compares the human body to the engine of a race car which runs at peak performance only when it is well tuned. He thinks it is just as important to try to prevent breakdowns of the human body as it is to repair breakdowns after they occur.

"I can't guarantee anyone that he or she will live a day longer if they accept my 'preventive maintenance' challenge. But there is strong evidence that people are more functional and productive between the ages

of 50 and 80 if they enter that period relatively healthy — weight under control and a sensible diet/exercise program in place. They will have more endurance and be better able to cope with stress, which generally is more threatening with advancing age."

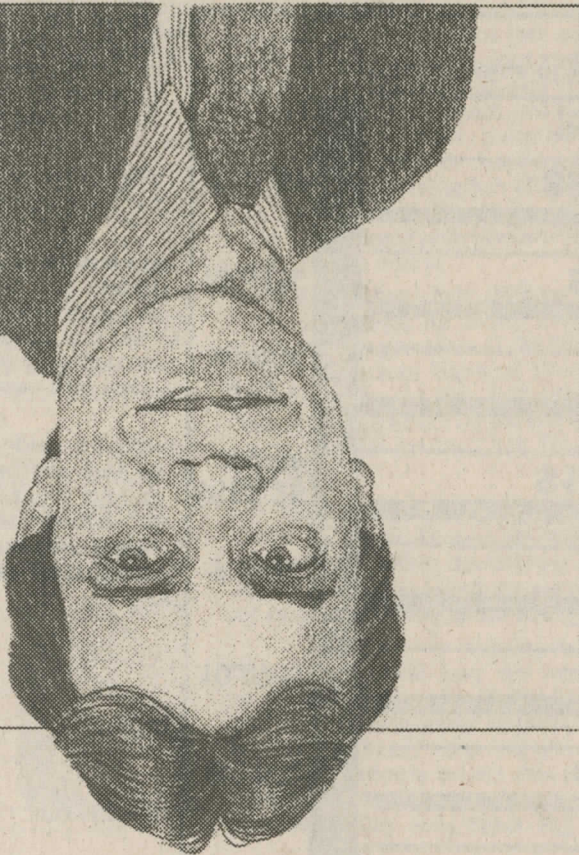
Under Bluth's preventive health and fitness program, the first step is testing and evaluation. "A person emerges with a looseleaf full of material telling him or her where they stand at their age compared to national health standards. In men, for example, the heart risk factor starts with a 19 percent overweight condition. In women that standard is 25 percent. There is a 78 percent correlation between these overweight percentages and heart attacks."

Being a physical therapist was by no means Bluth's life-long ambition. He played varsity baseball, basketball and football at Highland High School. He attended University of Utah 1½ years before going on an LDS mission to Hawaii.

"Being in Hawaii probably had some influence on my chosen profession. I met a number of people who had anticipated retirement many years only to encounter health problems before or shortly after retiring. What a shame, I thought, that many couldn't really enjoy the pleasures they worked for most their lives.

When Bluth returned from his mission, his future wife, Mary Brown

Alan Bluth



of Salt Lake City, was involved in physical therapy at the Primary Children's Medical Center. He met the therapist, at her insistence. He wound up working in therapy while pursuing a bachelor's degree in medical biology from the University of

Utah. He secured a master's degree in physical therapy from the University of Iowa, and returned to Primary Children's Medical Center for a year. "I enjoyed very much working with kids, but it was not what I really

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wanted. And I wanted my own

similar to that required by competitive athletes. Your knee is as important to you as the knee of a \$1 million-a-year athlete. The recreational athlete surge has caused knee injuries to reach an epidemic level."

He thinks, too, that soaring hospital and medical costs have encouraged Americans to take better care of themselves. As the public becomes better educated on health dangers related to overweight and poor physical condition, they generate more self-discipline and determination to do something about it.

Bluth works with several orthopedic specialists in the Salt Lake Valley on pre- and post-surgical back programs. "We can strengthen muscles — especially those in the stomach and legs — with a careful, consistent, program that will not aggravate a patient's symptoms. With restored strength, they respond much better to surgery — before and after."

He says there is excellent documentation that weight control, a consistent exercise program and proper diet decrease absenteeism and increase productivity and esprit de corps among business and industrial employees. "Many companies have gone to on-site fitness programs."

Bluth is very much agast against diets to lose weight. "When you virtually quit eating to lose weight, you drop 50 percent fat and 50 percent muscle — which isn't what you want at all. On the other hand, a prudent diet and active exercises will take away 96 percent fat, gain muscle and favorably change body composition. The exercise program is critical because you mobilize fat out of storage and put it inside muscle. Again, however, you can run 60 miles a week and still put on weight if you don't eat properly."

He says it takes 30 minutes of proper exercise before you stop burning carbohydrates and burn fat. "Only then do you produce a favorable change in body composition. Bluth recommends a variety of recreational activities — not just one. "Golf, for example, isn't good exercise. But if it's fun for you, play it. I like to play a lot of tennis, and last year I ran in seven marathons. Swimming is great. A combination of activities will strengthen all muscles. Those who participate in a variety of recreational activities are less susceptible to injury."

The Bluths have four children — Tyler, 12, Carrie, 10, Tobin, 7, and Tim 5. He was president of the Utah Chapter/American Physical Therapy Association, on the Governor's Council for Physical Fitness, and exercise director for the Utah Heart Association.

He discovered that hospitals in Heber City, Duchesne and Vernal, had no physical therapists. Most patients had to rent a place in Salt Lake City while receiving therapy. For eight years, Bluth lived in Heber City and was a travelling therapist, providing equipment, and clocking a bundle of 260-mile round trips. "Many of the winter jaunts turned into nightmares."

On this circuit, Bluth encountered countless people with physical problems that could have been prevented if they had taken care of themselves. "Many long-term hospital stays could have been avoided. I was convinced that physical therapy expertise was grossly underutilized in this area."

"To illustrate my point: After the common cold, the No. 1 cause for men missing work is low-back problems. For women, it is the imbalance of muscle groups from having children. Many of these problems could be eliminated through proper muscle toning."

Bluth became frustrated with his touring practice because "I could not create a setting to provide both education (prevention) and rehabilitation. American hospitals and medicine, generally, are geared to crisis treatment rather than prevention. Physicians are so busy putting out fires in the seriously ill they have little time for the prevention process. This is where the physical therapist can become an important member of the health care team."

His determination to become involved in both prevention and rehabilitation led Bluth to open the Sports Mall Rehabilitation Center, utilizing facilities at the Sports Mall in Murray and the Sports Mall/Metro in Salt Lake City.

Besides the preventive health and fitness program, Bluth and his staff have a H.E.A.R.T. program for cardiac rehabilitation and provide general physical therapeutic services. When Bluth opened the Sports Mall office in 1976, he was involved mainly with conventional athletic-related injuries. Today, though, the recreational athlete accounts for much business expansion. "Following a national trend, an increasing number of Utahns have become concerned about their health, and are participating more and more in recreational sports. Also, people have more leisure time."

"This has generated a need for recreational athletic rehabilitation